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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN MKOPOLOW

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SUBJECT: NEW HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN ELECTED

1. Summary: The Legislative Assembly elected Lisbeth Quesada Tristan to the 4-year independent post of human rights ombudsman (Defensor de los Habitantes) on August 4, 2005. Quesada, 53, is a medical doctor unaffiliated with any political party. The Ombudsman's position had been vacant since June 5. Brief biographical information is at paragraph 3. End summary.

2. Quesada's election puts an end to a lengthy political dispute which had left the high-profile human rights job vacant for nearly two months. After three rounds of voting, and by a margin of only five votes, a coalition of the National Liberation Party (PLN), Citizen's Action Party (PAC), and the Patriotic Union Party (UP) defeated the ruling Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) and Libertarian Movement Party (ML) candidate, lawyer Juan Jose Echeverria Alfaro. Quesada won 28 votes (the minimum necessary) as compared to 23 for Echeverria. Quesada seemed surprised by her victory and was obviously thrilled by it. In several gushy media interviews, Quesada stressed her independence from the parties that elected her and promised a rigorous defense of Costa Rica's health system and social safety net. Quesada will be sworn in on Tuesday, August 9. Her term will expire the same day in 2009. She can be re-elected once.

#### Biographical details

3. Quesada obtained a medical degree in 1984 from the University of Costa Rica and has practiced medicine since then. She has focused her career on pain management and did a year of post-graduate work in that field in 2001 at the Universidad El Salvador in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Since 1990, Quesada directed the Palliative Care Clinic at the National Children's Hospital. Since 2000, Quesada has also directed Albergue San Gabriel, a shelter for children with terminal cancer. She is a member of the General Assembly of the Costa Rican Cancer Institute. Born June 25, 1952, Quesada is a divorced mother of two. She originally sought a career on stage, working in theater and some television in the 1970's. Quesada received a Bachelor's degree in "Dramatic Arts" from the University of Costa Rica in 1981. Quesada has traveled frequently to the United States and speaks English well. She is an honorary member of the International Advisory Council, Children's Hospice International, Alexandria, Virginia, and in 1987, she received a Fulbright to research hospice medicine at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital in New York City.

4. Comment: In a positive development, the often-gridlocked Legislative Assembly has shown itself capable of filling an important position (albeit after an unseemly gap) with a non-partisan professional. Quesada's lack of political connections was clearly a factor in her victory as several Assembly members who supported her criticized her predecessor (and now presidential candidate) for using the human rights position as a springboard into national politics. Quesada has disavowed all interest in a political career. She impressed other legislators with her straight talk and humanitarian efforts, particularly her work with dying children. From her initial interviews, it is clear that Quesada will bring passion and energy to her new job, but her effectiveness in addressing human rights issues outside her extensive background in Costa Rica's health care system remains to be seen.

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